Real-World Presenting vs. Traditional Public Speaking

I hate traditional public speaking, don't you? By design, it is terrifying: you stand in front of a large crowd with your word-for-word script or notecards completely covered with your eloquent writing and catchy turns of phrases, and you try to deliver the speech as flawlessly and charismatically as you can. You desperately try to appear like a person of confidence, but you feel your stomach flipping, the beads of sweat forming on your forehead, and your hands shaking uncontrollably. You expect perfection from yourself, and you pray fervently that you don't say the wrong words, falter in speech or step, or lose your place and have to wade through the dreaded waters of a long, awkward silence. You grip the podium, avoid looking at the multitudes of eyes locked on you, and do your best to regurgitate your speech without letting your nerves betray you.

Yeah, that sucks. Thankfully, that's not what we will be doing in this class.

Yes, this class is called Public Speaking, a name chosen to reflect the basic genre encompassing the skills you will learn here, but you will *not* be learning the manuscript style of public speaking described above. You won't write scripts in this class—ever. You won't use a podium. You won't be expected to speak in poetic language or spew brilliance with every phrase that escapes your lips. Very few of you will need speechwriting or speech-recitation skills for your future careers, so there is limited value in teaching them to all of you.

Now, don't get me wrong: there are times and places for traditional, script-writing public speaking. In politics, every last word that speakers say is often scrutinized, replayed, and questioned on a relentless 24-hour analytical news cycle. In moments of high emotion—like weddings or funerals—pre-written speeches make sense to ensure that the intended message is relayed.

But in most cases, for most people, speechwriting is not a particularly vital skill for their success. What is incredibly important for everyone, though, is **presenting**, and *that* is the focus of this Public Speaking course.

Traditional Public Speaking: Focused on the Text

As alluded to above, traditional public speaking is an art form primarily concerned with the text. In other words, public speakers think about their potential audience members, and try to craft an ideal message to sway those listeners to a desired position or opinion. Speechwriters don't just attempt to find the most persuasive evidence or stories (which they do); they also carefully select every word and every phrase to connect logically and emotionally with their audience. The text is reviewed and revised, jokes are honed, and "sound bite" phrases are included to ensure the speech's lasting impact.

The speaker's job, then, is to deliver the text as flawlessly and passionately as possible. It's a job well suited for those with a penchant for the dramatic arts—folks good at memorizing and acting. The occasion feels grandiose and the goal is perfection.

The primary focus of a traditional speech, then, is on the process of writing a carefully crafted message, not necessarily on engaging with the audience facing the speaker. Surely, the speaker has taken the audience into account when the message was created, but in real time, the audience generally has little effect on the message as it is being shared. The listeners may cheer or boo throughout the speech, but it is likely that the speaker will continue as planned without any significant interruptions. Indeed,

many important political speeches—like the State of the Union Address, for example—are released to the press or the public in word-for-word transcripts *before* the speeches are even delivered.

This isn't generally surprising, though, since speeches are often intended to extend beyond the immediate audience. When Abraham Lincoln gave the Gettysburg Address, it was an address to the entire nation, not just to the crowd of 15,000 attending the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery. It was a speech that served as a rallying cry for the duration of the Civil War and beyond; it wasn't just for that one moment or for that one occasion or that one audience. Great speeches often have that transcendent quality; they are written with the hopes that the words will reach audiences far beyond their immediate context. Writing and delivering something that grand seems like a lot of pressure, doesn't it?

Presenting: Focused on the Audience

Where traditional public speaking is magnanimous and highly pre-planned, presenting is more routine—a form of oral communication without the trappings of grandness or the goal of posterity. It is an exchange of ideas focused primarily on the audience here and now, with a message that—while planned—is not set in stone (or written on notecards). Presenting is the communication you see daily: teachers teaching their students, businesspeople running meetings, salespeople pitching products, experts conducting training sessions, and even prospective employees interviewing for a job.

All of these scenarios are situational and directly involve the audience in the communication process. There is no script because the audience hearing the presentation plays a vital role in the presentation's success and thus can and should be a part of the exchange. Teachers need student feedback to know if students understand the lesson. Salespeople talk directly to their customers to find out what their needs are so they can explain how their product meets those needs. Experts conducting training sessions involve their audience in the presentation through scenarios and activities to help the ideas "stick."

Thus, *the focus of a good presentation is the audience*. Yes, you will take the time to plan your message (how it will be organized, what evidence you will use to support your points, etc.), but ultimately your focus will be on the audience to whom you are speaking *at that moment*. Your presentation will be tailored specifically for them at that time. Presentations have more defined goals than just to sway opinions: you are looking to teach something, sell something, get audience commitment on something, etc. Therefore, you will invite questions and criticisms, allow for interruptions, and be ready to adapt your presentation accordingly, because ultimately it is your audience that determines the success or failure of your presentation. If students don't learn anything from a lesson, the teacher's presentation failed. If potential customers don't see any value in a pitched product, then the salesperson's presentation failed. The only road to presentation success is through the audience.

Figure 1. In presentations, it's all about the audience.
Image by Isabel Chenoweth/Southern Connecticut State University, 2014.

Here is a key point we will visit a lot: *effective presenters make their presentations feel like conversations with their audiences* (Kuchta, 2016). Audiences don't want to be talked *at*; they want to be a part of the idea exchange. Audiences aren't passive; they have thoughts, concerns, and opinions that they want addressed. Thus, your audience members should have an active role in what you present to them.

Presenting Guidelines

So, what does this all mean for you—a student in CMS 101? It means that if you have taken public speaking before or have pre-conceived ideas about what it is or should be, you need to push those expectations aside. This method of public speaking we will learn may seem different and even uncomfortable at first, but, again, the goal of this course is not to teach you how to become a speechwriter. The goal of this course is to teach you to become a better communicator to and with your audience, whether you have had months or mere moments to plan your ideas. Ultimately, this conversational approach to public speaking will be a more valuable lesson for your professional life, so please stick with it.

So, how do you do this? Well, you can start by following some basic presentation guidelines. Below are some parameters to keep you headed toward an effective, audience-centered, conversational presentation rather than a stiff, one-way transmission of ideas:

1. **The audience comes first.** Always. We will revisit this idea when we talk about the presentation planning process of AIMC, but always remember that the audience to whom you are speaking in the moment determines the success or failure of your presentation. They should be at the forefront of your mind when planning *and* when delivering the presentation.
2. **Aim for a conversational feel.** Include your audience. Talk with them. Respond to their facial expressions or other nonverbal cues. Make it clear they are a part of this too.
3. **No scripts allowed.** You should decide on the basic ideas you want to convey to your audience, but you should not plan out the exact words to use. Regurgitating pre-planned phrasings will make you seem stiff. If you are truly an expert on your topic (and you should be), you should just be able to talk about it with your audience conversationally.
4. **No notes allowed.** This is a tough one for some folks, I know, but again, experts know what they are talking about…without notes, without index cards, and without wordy PowerPoint slides. Referencing notes throughout a presentation hurts your credibility as a speaker, and it interferes with your ability to be conversational with your audience. Notes also give nervous speakers too much of a reason not to look at their audience members, and as you will learn later, eye contact is crucial.

I know some of these guidelines will seem awkward or more nerve-wracking at first, but ultimately most of my students greatly prefer presenting over traditional public speaking. Furthermore, as audience members, they have noticed the marked difference in their own engagement, often comparing the dynamic presentations done by their classmates in CMS 101 to the very boring ones read to them in their other courses.

The Benefits of Presenting

Taking a presentations approach to public speaking doesn't just benefit the audience; there are clear benefits to you as the speaker as well:

1. **No one expects you to be perfect.** As mentioned earlier, traditional public speaking is considered an art form and thus has high expectations in the eloquence department. Audience members are looking to be moved, to have their hearts swell, to *feel* something that will make them remember your speech long after it's done. That is not the case for presentations. In a presentation, you are there to converse with people, not spit poetry at them. You have a specific aim in the here and now, and as long as that aim is met, you're good. If you say "uh" or "um" a few times, no one will care. If you completely lose your place and ask your audience or team members, "Now, where was I?" before getting back on track, no one will care. In presentations, your audience isn't looking for perfection; they are just looking for information.
2. **No one knows what you should say.** Since you are not writing a script for a presentation, there is no audience expectation that you say certain words or even that you cover certain topics in a particular order. There is no script to reference, which gives you a lot more freedom. If you mess up the order of ideas you planned to cover but it still made sense, no one would know. If you start covering a topic that doesn't seem to interest your audience, you can just cut it short and move onto something else. If your audience is really interested in something else you are saying, you can elaborate and have conversations about that. Without a script, you have more freedom.
3. **You don't have to memorize.** No script, no need for memorization. Certainly, as an expert on your topic you will need to *know* things, but you won't need to memorize long speeches or catchy lines. Instead, you will just need to plan out your basic organizational structure and then share the information in easy-to-understand ways.
4. **You already know how to converse.** At least part of this process should seem fairly natural to you since presentations are supposed to feel like conversations. Granted, presentations are often conversations happening between one presenter and many listeners, but ultimately the conversational aspect is similar. You will look at one person at time, just like you would for a conversation. You will ask questions of your audience and respond to their queries just like you would in a conversation. You will gesture and move around just like you would in a conversation. You will tell stories just like you would in a conversation. The fact that you already have some of these skills will help you to feel more at ease in the process. Students who engage their audience often feel and look much more comfortable than those who try to approach presenting with a stiffer, more traditional public-speaking style.

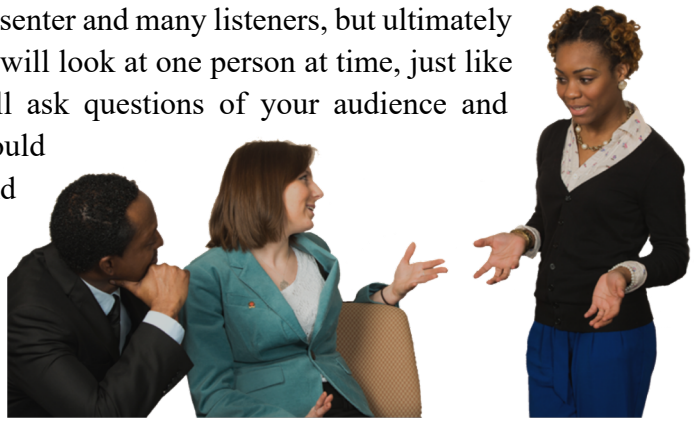

Figure 2. Converse with your audience.
Image by Isabel Chenoweth/Southern Connecticut State University, 2014.

5. **You are learning life skills.** Effective communication is a basic life skill that everyone needs. Browse through some open job postings and you will quickly see just how much employers expect and value communication skills. Students who take traditional public-speaking classes

certainly learn some stuff, but they largely hone their writing skills. If I ask you to write a speech about the habits of wasps (which I definitely would *not* ask you to do), you would certainly learn about wasps and how to write about them, but you wouldn't vastly improve your overall oral-communication skills. Teaching you to *talk with* your audience about your topics—to persuade people in real time—teaches you how to communicate effectively. Real communication involves active participants in the process, not just a speaker lecturing a group of listeners. Students who learn good presentation skills learn how to present themselves professionally and in an organized manner, even without time to prepare exactly what words they will say. At their core, good presentation skills are really just good communication skills, and everybody needs those.

Traditional Public Speaking	**Presenting**
Focused on the text	Focused on the audience
Words are scripted out ahead of time	No prewritten scripts
Speaker uses script or notes to deliver the speech	No script or notes allowed during delivery
Speaker stands behind a podium to deliver content	No podium, table, or other barrier between you and your audience
Speech is delivered as planned	Presentation is adapted to audience on the spot
Speech is intended to have transcendent quality	Presentation is highly contextual (designed for a specific audience at a specific time and occasion)
Perfection is an implied goal	Mistakes are fine, so long as the content still makes sense for the audience
Should sound magnanimous	Should sound conversational

Figure 3. Key differences between traditional public speaking and presenting.

Moving Forward with a Presentations Approach

In short, this course will teach you the communication skills you need to be an effective presenter, which will diverge in several important ways from traditional public speaking. At first, these changes may seem scary for you if you find comfort in writing out what you want to say and trying to commit it to memory, but please try to embrace this new approach. Competent communication skills take time to develop and hone, but they are indeed learnable. Great presenters are *made*, not born.

References

Kuchta, L. (2016). *Conversations with your audience: A practical guide for preparing and delivering professional presentations* (1st ed.). L. Kuchta, M. S. DiFrancesco, & D. J. Petroski (Eds.). San Diego, CA: Cognella.